

Source:

Katzman and Tuttle. Plain Folk.
Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

The significance of the publication of these lifelets was that between the Civil War and World War I the United States was self-consciously a nation of immigrants. From 1880 through 1919, the United States drew twenty-three million immigrants to her shores. Most immigrants entered at Ellis Island, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. Emma Lazarus expressed the gravitational pull of the United States when in 1883 she wrote "The New Colossus," contrasting the Statue of Liberty with the Colossus of Rhodes; one of the legendary wonders of the ancient world. The Philadelphia poet named the statue "Mother of Exiles," and gave voice to her silent lips:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. . . .

So they came, drawn by the beacons of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and hope. In the cities and on the prairies they sought their fortune. Railroad company advertisements, state emigration agents, and letters from relatives and friends in the United States promised success and prosperity; the riches to be found in America where "streets were paved with gold" became part of European folklore. Other immigrants came to practice their religion in the United States because it had no single established church and was more tolerant of religious diversity.

By the late 1880s the pattern of immigration to the United States was significantly different from that of the earlier period. Between 1860 and 1890, ten million immigrants arrived in the United States, predominantly from the British Isles, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Holland. In the peak year of 1882, eighty-seven percent of the immigrants came from these countries. But the fifteen million immigrants who entered the United States between 1890 and 1914 came largely from Italy, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Greece, Rumania, and Turkey. Referred to as the "new immigrants," people from these countries comprised eighty-one percent of all immigrants in the peak year of 1907.

European conditions influenced the ebb and flow of immigration to the United States. Industrialization in northern Europe opened up economic opportunities at the end of the nineteenth century and slowed emigration abroad. Heavy migration to the United States earlier in the century had reduced pressures from overpopulation and removed some of the stimuli for leaving northern and western Europe. The famine and poor crops in Ireland in the 1840s and in Sweden in the 1860s had not been repeated. At the same time, conditions in eastern and southern Europe had encouraged millions of families and individuals to leave their homes to find new lives across the ocean. Not only had many eastern and southern Europeans faced limited economic opportunities at home, but also population in those parts of Europe was expanding rapidly, and small farmers, craftsmen, and peasants could neither support their families nor provide opportunities for their children. In some cases, landlords promoted emigration by dispossessing their tenants. In addition, some people fled to the United States for safety, as did Jews from czarist Russia after 1881. Government-provoked pogroms in Russia destroyed countless Jewish communities and killed thousands. Similarly European ethnic minorities—Germans in Russia, Greeks in Rumania, Macedonians in the Balkans, and Czechs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—found their ethnic identity repressed and, without a national state, sought freedom in the United States. Moreover, the development of transoceanic steamers brought the cost of the Atlantic passage within the means of large masses of eastern and southern Europeans for the first time; they booked passage either with tickets bought themselves or with those purchased and sent back by relatives already in the New World.

The earlier immigrants, those from northern Europe, had received a more hospitable reception in the United States than did the new immigrants. The report of the Dillingham Commission, established by Congress in 1907 to investigate the shift in immigration, reflected the changed American attitude toward immigration and the new immigrants. The commission reported that there was a fundamental difference in the character of American immigration before and after the 1880s. In the earlier period, immigration had been largely a movement of families seeking permanent homes in the New World.

Northern Europeans, the report argued, had assimilated quickly into American society. In contrast, the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were in large part unskilled laborers who had come as transients. Unlike earlier immigrants, they avoided agriculture and congregated in the industrial cities of the East and Midwest, where they clustered in their own communities apart from other Americans.

In dwelling on the "perils" to American society from the new immigration, the Dillingham Commission was wrong but many of its descriptions of the new immigrants were correct. Many of the new immigrants were transients, in part because steamer passage facilitated easy travel back and forth across the Atlantic. On the other hand, those who, like the Jews, had fled religious persecution usually settled permanently in the United States. Most of the new immigrants did settle in cities rather than in agricultural areas, thus stimulating the emergence of ghettos in which ethnic-based foreign-language societies and institutions flourished. Many of the old immigrants, however, had exhibited similar patterns. British and Irish immigrants to the United States, for instance, were no less transient than the new immigrants: between 1881 and 1889, 370,000 Britons and Irish left the United States to return home. Those emigrating from the British Isles also congregated together, forming ethnic enclaves within American society. For example, ethnically based societies and institutions thrived in predominantly Welsh mining towns and English mill villages throughout the United States. These immigrants, too, founded their own churches, groceries, taverns, sports leagues, and newspapers separate and apart from the rest of American society.

What did change radically was the attitude of many native-born Americans toward immigrants in general, and this change found expression in virulent hostility against the new immigrants. The optimism with which Emma Lazarus had penned "The New Colossus" in 1883 had faded by the turn of the century; pessimism over the ability of the United States to absorb large numbers of immigrants had become dominant. The experiences of Americans in a society undergoing transformation from a traditional, mostly agrarian society to a modern, industrial, and urban America was so searing and uprooting that optimism itself became a major victim.

Earlier in the century, Americans had welcomed immigrants. The potential garden beyond the Mississippi lured people to till the soil and to recover the abundance of natural resources. All who could make the journey would contribute to the nation's productivity; through their labor in the garden, unused land would yield harvests. They would become the independent yeoman farmers of the Jeffersonian tradition and, in the process, help shape the new America, a blending of all the finer characteristics of the Old World shaped by the best of the new one. It was an optimistic vision, at least for whites; blacks, Orientals, and Native Americans were excluded.

In the late nineteenth century this optimism began to erode. Industrialization brought in its wake major depressions in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. Labor conflict and violence dramatically undermined visions of a natural harmony between capital and labor. European political radicalism and utopianism in the forms of socialism, communism, and anarchism brought nascent revolutionary stirrings to American shores. Events highlighted and exacerbated these very real fears: the violence of the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania coal fields, the national railroad strike of 1877, the 1886 Haymarket massacre, the 1893 Pullman strike, mining strikes in Colorado, and the assassinations of two presidents—James Garfield and William McKinley—all contrasted sharply with the optimistic vision of the pre-Civil War pastoral republic.

Native-born Americans blamed immigrants for these developments. Some attributed economic depressions to the inability of the new immigrants to adapt to American society. Others complained that the immigrants did not work hard enough or that, by avoiding agriculture, immigrants formed a parasitic group within the economy. Some Americans complained that the new immigrants brought conflicts with them from the Old World to the New; their politics or ethnic nationalism or class identity or religion introduced unnatural conflict in what was a harmonious society. The growing distrust of immigrants culminated during the depression of 1893 to 1897. The American Protective Association, founded as an anti-Catholic organization, blamed nearly all of America's problems on the new immigrants. From the well of Congress in Washington, D.C., to the pulpits of churches in the Midwest, orators expressed their loss of faith in the

ability of the United States to absorb immigrants or in the wisdom of even trying to do so. In addition, many people now saw the wealth of the United States as finite. Immigrants not only did not contribute to the growing national wealth or productivity, but also, the anti-immigrant argument went, by increasing the population they had reduced the slices of the finite pie of resources available to everyone. Economic recovery in 1897 and the decline of the American Protective Association did not end the debate over the contribution of immigrants. The Dillingham Commission clearly doubted the ability of American society to absorb the new immigrants, and its findings were supported by contemporary theories of race in anthropology, so that by the 1920s free entry into the United States would be virtually ended.

While the native-born debated immigration policy, immigrants built and reshaped much of American society and life. They had helped build the American industrial order and, contrary to popular mythology, many of them had settled the agricultural land which fed the burgeoning cities; and they had helped build the railroads and supplied the labor for mines and factories. They had also transformed American politics, introducing the personalized style of clubhouse and patronage politics, and they had altered the political agenda, becoming a voice in state action. They had created new institutions in American society and, by doing so, had introduced the cultural variety and pluralism which have become hallmarks of the United States.

In reshaping American society, immigrants experienced a process in which they themselves were reshaped as well. In immigrating to the United States, they brought with them life-styles and cultural patterns different from the ones they encountered here; the ideals, habits, and rituals of life in their native hamlets and cities differed from the society they encountered after passing through Ellis Island. Once in the United States, immigrants wrestled with the conflict between adapting to American society while trying to maintain their traditional, European customs. Many wished to become "Americanized," to shed the label of "greenhorn" and mirror their image of the native-born, while many others sought to resist Americanizing, to maintain their native languages and life-styles. Settlement in an immigrant ghetto, for instance, could shelter the immigrant from direct and

pervasive contact with American culture. Assimilation in or resistance to American culture, however, were ideal extremes; in reality, most immigrants accepted some aspects of American society while resisting others. But the process created a basic tension which became characteristic of immigrant life.

Cultural tensions were not limited solely to European immigrants. The American-born were moving as well, from farm to city, from one region of the country to another, and from city to city; they, too, encountered new patterns of life and experienced the tensions of the adaptive-resistance process. For example, Southern black men and women, Kentucky hill people, and Vermont farm girls all encountered new cultural patterns in the cities to which they migrated. Even Americans who remained in their rural surroundings had to deal with economic and social change. Industrialization and urbanization so transformed the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that all Americans—immigrants and native-born, movers and stayers alike—had to confront changing life patterns. As producers and consumers, Americans became interdependent on each other and on regional or national markets. Subsistence farming, for example, gave way to the staple agricultural system where farmers grew crops for market and entered the money economy. Railroads brought their farm produce to market and returned with manufactured and consumer goods for farmers to purchase. Simultaneously, the craftsman's workshops and the apprentice-journeyman-master system gave way to structured factories and assigned work tasks. Consumer items were no longer made to order locally; they carried a fixed price and were manufactured rather than crafted.

Workers in the United States, whether native or foreign-born, had been accustomed to traditional work rhythms. People in rural society, for example, had followed such rhythms of nature as the sun and rainfall. Before artificial lights, craftsmen spent more time at their benches during the longer daylight hours of summer than in the shorter daytime of winter. Agriculture obviously had seasonal cycles as well: intensive seasonal planting, weeding, and harvesting, sometimes around the clock, followed by harvest holidays and a slower work pace until the cycle was repeated the following year. The pattern differed, however, from village to village, as different nationality and

religious groups pursued their own customs and rhythms. Industrial society changed the structure of work in the United States. Unlike the craftsmen who had made the whole product, such as a shoe or coat or chair, factory workers gathered in large numbers under one roof, performed according to preset rules, and became minutely specialized in making one item or accomplishing one task. In the factory a worker cut soles or sewed buttons or lathed chair legs or merely assembled the final product. Rather than using their judgment or experience gained from years as apprentices or journeymen, or of fitting the needs of a customer with whom they had dealt personally, they now performed impersonal tasks assigned by managers or engineers. Under the factory system control of the work lay with the foreman, not with the workers themselves.

Industrial society imposed new work habits on all workers. The discipline of the clock replaced seasonal and cultural rhythms, and employees worked a fixed number of hours in summer and winter. Factory workers were cogs in a complex machine which required harmony, unity, and subservience to function. Factory managers were thus intolerant of work patterns that encouraged workers, in performing tasks, to follow traditional cultural and ethnic rhythms rather than the preassigned discipline. Bosses, for example, would not tolerate workers who insisted on celebrating their own national holidays rather than reporting to work. Managers insisted that workers had to be trained to adapt to the factory; they needed new discipline, new habits, new attitudes. Bosses clothed the process in the most patriotic of terms: it was Americanization. Those who failed to adapt not only threatened the new American industrial order, the job of building modern America, but denied themselves the fruits of American capitalism.

For workers the process of change was complex and demanding, although the new discipline offered not only economic benefits but also in some cases physical survival. But there was value in tradition as well. Indeed, many people perceived their very identity and sense of self to be indivisible from ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions. The demands of the factory conflicted with familial and kinship ties, religious imperatives, and social customs and patterns. Many refused to accept the inevitability of the changes wrought by

factory civilization. The most significant labor organization of the mid-1880s, the Knights of Labor, represented, in part, a rejection of the new industrial order. The Knights pictured an ideal society of small shopkeepers and independent craftsmen living and working within a Christian cooperative commonwealth. Similarly many workers sought to escape the new discipline by becoming their own bosses. Seeking to rise in the social order rather than trying to improve their conditions as workers, they identified with foremen and aspired to join the latter's ranks. Or they started their own businesses, substituting intensive labor for a lack of capital. Although few were successful, the slim prospects of success did not extinguish the flame of hope.

Many of the factory workers engaged in a struggle with managers over control of their work tasks and conditions. On a daily basis they resisted the new discipline and habits, continuing to perform tasks according to traditional patterns and absenting themselves from work on ethnic and religious holidays. Some formed labor unions in a collective attempt to exert control over their working lives. Later workers turned to government and, through hours, wage, and safety legislation, sought to check management's powers. These tensions in the workplace between the pulls of tradition and custom on the one hand, and the demands of the modern, industrial society on the other were experienced nearly everywhere in America in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Yet in the face of tension and insecurity, the lives of these undistinguished Americans had value and substance. If at times they lost faith in others, they seemed to maintain faith in themselves. They struggled with themselves and the larger society, with their tensions and insecurities, to make something of their own lives. Their voices, in the written word, are of people proud and self-aware. Their ability to articulate their own lives sets them apart from others of their generation; yet one can easily imagine hearing similar tales from their coworkers and neighbors if we could go back in time and interview them. Unable to do so we should then listen with greater attention to their stories.

Lawrence, Kansas
January 1, 1981

(Record answers on separate sheet)

Discussion Questions:

1. What forces encouraged and discouraged immigration in the U.S.?
2. Immigration patterns have been divided into two different categories: Old (1860-1890) and New (1890-1914). Describe the differences that existed between the two.
3. When and why did attitudes of native-born Americans change toward immigrants?
4. Describe the ways immigrants have built and reshaped much of American society and life?
5. What does it mean to be "Americanized"?
6. How did industrialization and urbanization transform U.S. society?